OPINION

BY MUNA KHAN

Indecent dissent

I'M sure you've come across the video of journalist Shahzeb Khanzada being harassed in Canada with his wife. The gentleman who accosted him aggressively was complaining about Khanzada's bias against Imran Khan and his wife. The aggressor posted the video on social media and you can see Khanzada does not engage with him. The incident has been condemned by people across party lines, including PTI leader Gohar Khan.

There is nothing really unusual about this video. It is almost a new kind of reality show for us to watch public officials get abused in public places, including holy sites like Makkah. Psychologists will tell you that public humiliation is a form of abuse and causes distress to the victim but what does it say about those who enjoy watching it, or worse, goading people into doing it? Are they our version of the slur 'white trash', ie, uncouth and uncultured? Or is this to be expected after years of feeling neglected by public officials' misgovernance?

The new reality is that no one is entitled to privacy and, as we're seeing, not even to basic respect. We live at a time where everything is about seeking online attention and then validation for which you often need content if you want to go viral, become a trend, etc. We find pleasure — and profit — in someone else's shaming. It is our new sport.

For one set of people Khanzada's harasser represents all that is ugly about discourse in Pakistan. To another group though he is the new hero who doubled down against Khanzada when his identity was revealed. He is being interviewed for his courage by the very vloggers who profit from spreading lies.

Digital harassment is a real threat but it can quickly turn to acts of physical violence. There are plenty of examples in Pakistan of how social media posts led to real physical harm, including lynching. There are other journalists like Talat Hussain who have faced harassment when they were out with their families. You can disagree with journalists but there must be a way to do so without intruding on their personal space and intimidating them.

Let us be clear about one thing: when you accost journalists you are not doing it for the sake of accountability or hearing their point of view. You don't even know what journalism is. Therein lies the whole problem. You think journalism is confirming your own point of view; everything else is '*lifafa*' or shilling for the establishment.

Journalism is not clippings posted on social media that do not tell the whole story. They are often used by vloggers to perpetuate their point of view, as likely happened in Khanzada's case.

I find it equally unsettling to hear the government of the day lecture us on what journalism is meant to be, especially when each administration goes to new lengths to stifle free speech. Pakistan consistently ranks as one of the most dangerous places for journalists. The Pakistan Press Foundation documented 137 attacks on journalists from January to October 2025, including 35 incidents of physical assault, two injuries during reporting, five detentions, two abductions, and four attacks on media properties.

Yet journalists put their lives on the line to hold the powerful to account. They need the public's support and not to fear the public. Maybe it's time the whole country got a lecture on what constitutes journalism and how, when done right, journalism is a public good.

This dog-eat-dog culture of turning everything into a public spectacle for entertainment and dollars cannot become our new norm. We have to find a way to reclaim a space where we can have civil dialogue. We have to find effective fair laws that redress grievances.

> We find pleasure and profit in someone else's shaming.

The AI-generated video of journalist Benazir Shah currently doing the rounds is vile. Her decision not to pursue legal action on the principle that Peca laws are problematic should be reconsidered. I appreciate her position. But without legal action against them, perpetrators of the crime get away with it. And do it again and again. They have one purpose — to bully journalists into silence or harass them until they side with them to avoid getting trolled. In that respect, they are no different to the state that stifles dissent.

What kind of consequences should men like Khanzada's harasser face? I read on social media there is talk of denying him the necessary Pakistani ID, which is simply ridiculous. You can't deny a man entry to Pakistan because he used a phone to record someone in public. But you can encourage people to pursue legal avenues if they feel threatened.

Can we find ways to dissent in a decent manner, both as citizens and lawmakers, who are making it impossible to practice any speech (forget free speech)? No good comes from policies rooted in vindictiveness. ■

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BY BINA SHAH

Great beauty

RECENTLY, I attended the press conference for the Adab Festival, an event that features prominently on the nation's cultural and literary calendar. I'm always glad to see regional and provincial languages promoted at our literary festivals, and this year at Adab, one of the languages of Gilgit-Baltistan — Burushaski to be precise — was included in a *mushaira* in which poets Ahmed Ali Jan and Qamar Kazmi participated.

This inclusion resonated with me this year because I've been teaching expository writing at the AKU's Faculty of Arts and Sciences this semester, and many of my students come from Gilgit-Baltistan, Chitral, Hunza, Kohistan. They've left their homes up in the mountains to seek knowledge in the big bad city of Karachi, but they're also educating everyone here about themselves, their land, culture, norms and values, and their dreams and hopes for the future.

At first I had no idea of Gilgit-Baltistan's Buddhist history, or how Sufi preachers brought Islam to Baltistan from Persia and Central Asia. Nobody taught me that the Gilgit Scouts mutinied in 1947 to overthrow the Dogra kings of Jammu and Kashmir, and that's how Gilgit-Baltistan came under Pakistan's jurisdiction. We still operate in a headspace where those separate regions are collectively and dismissively called 'the Northern Areas' and envisioned as a land of great natural beauty simply waiting for us to discover it. We lack true understanding or knowledge of its rich history, culture, religions, and societies. Part of this is because of its isolation — the Karakoram Highway reconnected Gilgit-Baltistan by road to the rest of the country in 2017. But even now, we do not care to learn about their religions, their folklore, or their political aspirations to becoming a fifth province of Pakistan.

I now know the names of the languages: Burushaski, Shina, Khowar and Waakhi, as I hear the students speaking them every day in the halls of the university. These young adults are trying to figure out their place in the federation of Pakistan. As their society transitions, they are vulnerable to outside forces that threaten to overwhelm their culture and exploit their material wealth. The promotion of Gilgit-Baltistan's languages and literature (mostly an oral tradition) at festivals that can showcase their art, their music, their culture, their scholars, is a huge opportunity for cultural diplomacy within our nation.

This year, sociologist Dr Nosheen Ali and research scholar Aziz Ali Dad have established the very first independent press in Gilgit-Baltistan, Raachi Publications. It is named after the traditional female deity who is the guardian spirit of the land. Raachi's first book is *Beyond the Mountains: Social and Political Imaginaries in Gilgit Baltistan*, co-edited by Dr Ali and Aziz Ali Dad. It's been successfully launched in Pakistan, the UK and the US, where Dr Ali teaches at New York University. When Aziz Ali Dad gave a talk at my university this month, I was informed the book is already out of print.

The book consists of 16 chapters written by different researchers that explore a multitude of facets about life, land and social thought in Gilgit-Baltistan. Muhammed Feyyas discusses geopolitics, statehood and violence; Khalid Manzoor Butt writes of ethnic diversity and collective actions. There are several chapters on politics and governance in Gilgit-Baltistan, and how the people are struggling for participation. Dr Ali writes a chapter identifying Gilgit-Baltistan as the "Eco-Body" of the nation. The book is a perfect representation of the region: multilingual, collaborative and indigenous, which also reflects the ethos and social awareness of its people as it passes through a crucible of modernisation and de-velopment. They worry: what of theirs will truly survive?

> We lack true knowledge of GB's rich history.

Another thing I have learned is the Gilgit-Baltistan reverence for the natural world and everything in it. The animist religious tradition believed that not just humans, but also animals, mountains and rocks have a spirit; glaciers have genders and can be 'married' (as described in Uzma Aslam Khan's excellent *Thinner Than Skin*).

Aziz Ali Dad spoke of how Gilgit-Baltistan is the land of juniper trees, and that these trees were where fairies loved to perch in throngs. But now, instead of fairies, people look at those juniper trees and only see the money they can fetch on the market.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan see their land and their lives as rich, thriving and meaningful. They seek a path to development that preserves and restores their heritage, keeping their values and voices intact. Sometimes it's hard to see the reading and writing of books as a political act, but amplifying Gilgit-Baltistan narratives is vital if we want to face the future as a unified nation, not a divided entity. ■

The writer teaches expository writing at AKUFAS.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Basic structure intact

RAWALPINDI: Emphasising that the recent constitutional amendments were peripheral, the Federal Education and Provincial Co-ordination Minister, Abdul Hafeez Pirzada, today [Nov 22] said that the fundamental structure of the Constitution remains intact and untouched. Mr Pirzada, who made a thorough analysis of the Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Bill in a TV and Radio interview, said the amendments had no bearing, whatsoever, on the basic structure of the Constitution.

The fundamental Constitutional principles, which were not affected in any way … were Parliamentary democracy, Federal structure of Government with division of powers between the Federation and the Provinces, and independence of judiciary from the executive. Mr Pirzada proved that there had been no interference with the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution which confers upon the judiciary vast powers in matters of preventive detention which no other country in South Asia, having parliamentary democracy, had done. He pointed out that there was nothing to prevent the judiciary from striking down a preventive detention order of the executive within hours of its issuance.

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Rupee value

NEW DELHI: The Bharati Finance Minister, Mr C.D. Deshmukh, said in the Parliament today [Nov 22] that he was not in a position to say how long it would take to reach an agreement on the par value of the Pakistan Rupee. The Finance Minister, who was replying to a question, said he had expected the matter would come up (before the IMF) some time this month, but recent indications showed that it might be postponed for some time more at the instance of the Executive authorities of the IMF.

Answering another question as to how the par value of the Pakistan Rupee was being fixed, he said that would be asking about the discussion that was yet to take place in the matter. He himself did not know what recommendations the IMF would make in this respect and, therefore, he could not give any detailed reply to the question.

He informed the House that from time to time some suggestions had been made to the Pakistan Government for considering the question of exchange ratio. "But Pakistan had specifically excluded discussion on two subjects, namely, the par value of the Pakistan Rupee and the price of Jute," Mr Deshmukh added. — *Dawn* Delhi correspondent

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Fun in the name of poverty alleviation

THIS is with reference to the article 'The poverty measurement industry' (Nov 12), which rightly asserted that the real poverty in Pakistan today "is not of income or data", but of imagination, courage and reforms. Indeed, such poverty exists across our institutions, organisations and government departments that deal with a spectrum of poverty-related issues.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the United Nations emphasise that poverty reduction requires multifaceted actions. China's remarkable success in lifting millions out of poverty — widely recognised by the UN — was achieved through diverse and coordinated initiatives. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, despite decades of efforts by the government, social development organisations and various rural support programmes, poverty continues to rise.

Having observed poverty alleviation initiatives closely for over forty years, I have seen how most approaches have failed to make a lasting impact. A number of organisations still believe that addressing individuals through microcredit, microfinance or small-scale infrastructure can reduce poverty. While this approach may have worked decades ago, it has now proven insufficient. The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme succeeded to some extent only because it addressed collective issues — such as water, health, sanitation, agriculture, livestock, education and insurance — rather than focusing solely on individuals and families. Unfortunately, other rural support programmes have failed to replicate this model effectively.

A major reason for this stagnation is the lack of reforms in governance structures. Many such programmes have the same board members who have occupied their seats for decades. Most are retired government officials who were themselves unable to address poverty effectively during their service years.

The naysayer may, in fact, take a look at the Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) to see what is so wrong about the system. Nearly half of the board members have been in place since the organisation's inception in 2003.

The SRSO board recently approved two bonuses for over 900 regular employees, after the chief executive officer (CEO) claimed to have 'saved' one billion rupees by cutting budgets for social mobilisation, staff and community training. Instead of questioning such a decision, the SRSO board actually praised it. How can a poverty-focused organisation justify rewarding its staff with bonuses while poverty in its target areas continues to rise? The funds 'saved' should have been reinvested into communities — to build livelihoods, strengthen resilience and reduce human suffering. This is precisely what is wrong with our approach to poverty elimination. This is not what the SRSO board was interested in finding out.

Aijaz Ali Khuwaja
Karachi

State's responsibility

I LIVE in my homeland. However, despite my patriotism, I often feel trapped within certain constraints. While many around the world feel safe and secure in their own countries, I merely keep wondering why I do not share such a feeling. No law, no constitutional amendment has been able to answer the many questions that agitate my mind.

The state keeps altering our choices, and asks us every time to own them as our own choices made by our own conscious minds. People raising a voice of dissent even risk losing their voice.

The state surely has the authority to make decisions, but those decisions must serve the interests of the nation. It is the responsibility of the state and its executive machinery to establish rules and laws to eliminate crime that is rampant in society. Has that ever been the case? Ask yourself.

Nimra Gulzar
Faisalabad

E-challan failure

WHILE the people of Karachi are being burdened with exorbitant challans — often issued without proper verification — recent reports have revealed that nearly 21,000 vehicles belonging to influential individuals, including elites, politicians, ministers and their family members, have been quietly filtered out of the system. Since there has been no official denial of such reports, one has to accept them for what they are; a shocking revelation that exposes how crooked the system happens to be.

Adding to mass public frustration is the sudden disappearance of an electronic monitoring box near Bilawal House in Clifton to remove e-ticketing activity in that zone. This move raises many serious questions: Why does the law need to bend or pause when it comes to areas linked with powerful individuals? And why is the harshest version of enforcement reserved only for the people?

Once again, Karachiites these days find themselves being victims of a two-tiered system — one that aggressively penalises ordinary citizens, but spends its energies on shielding the privileged.

Such selective implementation not only undermines the credibility of the e-challan initiative, but also erodes public trust in institutions responsible for ensuring justice and fairness.

If digitalisation is truly meant to bring transparency, then it must apply equally to everyone. Anything less than that only reinforces the perception that Karachi continues to be trapped under the grip of an unjust system where accountability is optional for some and compulsory for others.

It is high time the provincial authorities investigated the case of these alleged exemptions, restored transparency, and ensured that the law gets implemented uniformly — without any fear or favour.

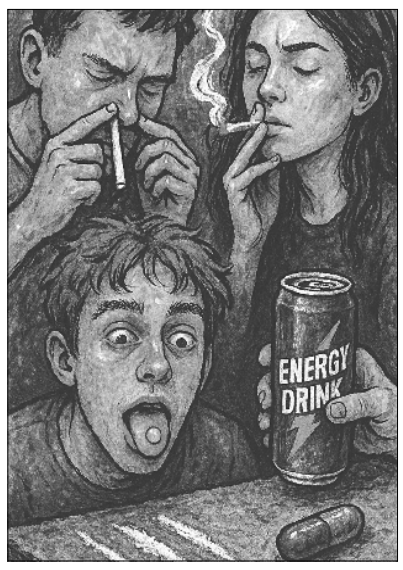
Syed Farhan Ahmed Qadri
Karachi

▶ **CORRUPTION REPORT:** This is with reference to the report 'IMF highlights corruption risks across state institutions' (Nov 20). Pakistan's ranking on the Corruption Perception Index remains alarming, while nations like Denmark, Finland and Singapore demonstrate how transparency drives stability and growth. If systemic corruption continues unchecked, the misery of the people will only deepen and Pakistan will remain trapped in an endless cycle of debt, with no sustainable development or economic independence. Fighting corruption is not an optional activity anymore; it is the only path to national progress and genuine prosperity.
Aamir Khan Wagan
Larkana

▶ **CRICKET CHAOS:** Islamabad and Rawalpindi residents once again faced massive traffic chaos during the recent cricket match in Rawalpindi. The movement of the teams from their hotels to the stadium caused roadblocks on major arteries. To make matters worse, bus services were suspended during these times, leaving thousands of daily commuters stranded. While cricket fans cheered inside the stadium, ordinary people struggled on roads and streets. It is clear that the stadium needs to be moved somewhere outside the city. Planners and relevant authorities should seriously consider such a possibility.
Muhammad Anfal
Islamabad

▶ **BRIGHT HEADLIGHTS:** Driving on the roads of Lahore has now become a test of nerves due to the increasing use of bright LED lights. These lights are harsh on human eyes and leave the drivers blinded for a few critical seconds. Moreover, people use high beams unnecessarily while driving, which create temporary blindness for the person coming from the opposite direction. Such acts result in deadly accidents on roads. The authorities concerned must take strict action against those who violate laws. Drivers should be educated about the correct use of headlights to prevent accidents.
Fizzah Kafeel
Lahore

Rampant drug abuse



THE rising abuse of an anticonvulsant medication in the market is destroying the lives of the country's youth. The drug, whose generic name is pregabalin and which is available under different brand names, decreases the number of pain signals that are sent out by damaged nerves in the body. Young individuals, even including teenagers, across the country are using it mixed with so-called energy drinks or soft drinks. They buy it over-the-counter (OTC) without any prescription, and mix it with caffeinated and carbonated drinks to intensify tthe effect and to have a strong kick. What begins as experimentation, often influenced by peer pressure or the desire for a cheap 'high', quickly spirals into severe addiction.

The misuse of these and other such drugs should serve as a wake-up call. These medications, meant to treat legitimate medical conditions, like epilepsy and neuropathic pain, are being treated as recreational drugs. The consequences are devastating — respiratory depression, overdose, addiction and, in worst cases, death.

What should trouble us the most is how accessible these dangerous substances have become. Any young person can walk into a pharmacy and buy them without a prescription or proper supervision. Pharmacies, either due to negligence or profit motives, are selling these controlled medications as if they were ordinary painkillers. Meanwhile, our youth remain unaware of the severe health risks they are taking.

Parents, teachers and community leaders must urgently educate society about this menace. We need to look for warning signs among our young. Unusual drowsiness, slurred speech, mood swings, declining academic performance, and withdrawal from family activities could indicate that a young person is trapped in this dangerous addiction.

The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (Drap) and provincial health departments must immediately declare all such drugs as controlled substances, and impose strict prescription requirements through proper record-keeping at pharmacies. The pharmacists should exercise their professional responsibility, and stop selling these medications without valid prescriptions. Parents must stay vigilant and maintain open communication with their children. Educational institutions must organise awareness sessions about drug abuse, including misuse of prescription drugs. Media can help spread awareness about the crisis through dedicated campaigns and programmes. Finally, law-enforcement agencies should strengthen monitoring of pharmacies and take strict action against those violating regulations. This is not just a health crisis; it is a social emergency that threatens our future generation.

Muhammad Faizan
Karachi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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